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Aspects of the Kurdish Problem in Turkey

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Introduction

This article examines the Kurdish problem in its Turkish context. It focuses on those factors which have contributed to it and which may equally apply to other groups who feel excluded from and unrepresented by the political process of the regimes to which they belong. There is an in-depth section about HADEP (Peoples’ Democratic Party) and the final section is the Document of Mutual Understanding which points to possible paths to be taken towards a satisfactory resolution.

Overview of the Kurdish problem in Turkey

A nation is a collectivity of citizens whose rights and responsibilities are registered and guaranteed by a constitution. Citizenship is a legal-political quality acquired by being a member of a nation organized under the roof of a state regardless of ethnic, cultural and religious affiliation. So nationhood is a legal-political construct based on the will of the people who desire to live together. However, the concept of nation-state is founded on the premise that the nation is a homogeneous entity both culturally and racially/ ethnically. The term ‘melting pot’ is suitably created to define or to achieve this ‘undifferentiated’ entity.

Turks and Kurds, Greeks, Armenians, Albanians, Bosnians, Arabs and so on, among other ethnic and religious groups, are the heirs of the multiethnic and multicultural Ottoman Empire that was dis-
mantled following the First World War. The Republic of Turkey was one of the nation-states that emerged out of the debris of the Ottoman Empire. When it was established in 1923 it started off with a pluralistic vision of its cultural heritage. The state was not named after its founding majority, the Turks, but rather after the political geography it was based on: (Republic of) Turkey. Most of her problems today, including the ‘Kurdish problem’, really emerged after the dissolution of the loose administration of the imperial rule that allowed autonomy at the local level. Here are some typical contributory factors or problem areas that led to the formation of the Kurdish Problem:

- Nation-building that started in a multicultural environment took a decisive turn towards the Turkification of the population after the Kurdish rebellions shook the republican regime as early as 1925.
- The vision of multiculturalism or ‘cultural federalism’ was abandoned early in the nation-building process in search of unity. A heavy dose of centralism and a hastened modernization programme, implemented from above, marked the character of the republican regime: ‘progressive centralism’.
- In the absence of a progressive bourgeoisie who would pick up the banner of nationalism in its mission of nation-building or a working class who would struggle for social justice and equitable distribution of wealth and power, the Turkish bureaucracy took on the mission of creating a modern nation-state.

Turkey is experiencing serious difficulties in overcoming her systemic problems due to the bureaucratic nature of the political institutions that have been shaped since the creation of the Republic in 1923. As a result of these conditions, she is increasingly unable to keep up with the pace of change, manage her complex social structure and satisfy multiplying popular needs and demands.

In addition, the state-centred structure of the polity has become too centralized, restrictive, and authoritarian. Hence, neither individual, nor group expectations and demands (including cultural freedoms) are fully understood or met by the central authority (the state). The detachment of the political ‘centre’ has led to the estrangement of society from the state. As a result, this has had an